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• Wesel, Ellen K.
Santa Monica, CA 90404 (US)
• Wang, Arthur W.
Cypress, CA 90630 (US)
• Pavloff, Michael S.
Redondo Beach, CA 90277 (US)

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(71) Applicant:
Hughes Electronics Corporation
El Segundo, California 90245-0956 (US)

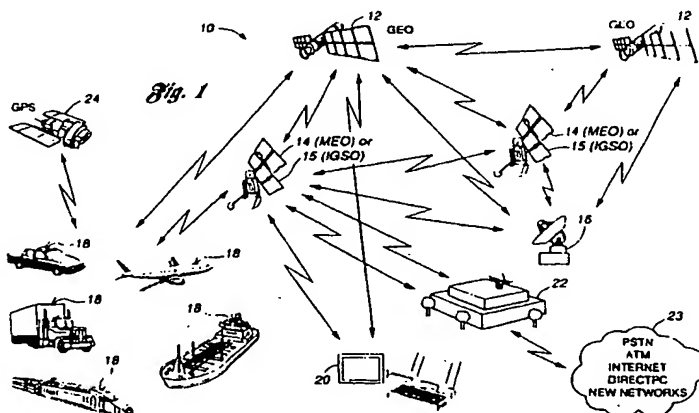
(74) Representative:
Lindner, Michael, Dipl.-Ing. et al
Patentanwälte,
Witte, Weller & Partner,
Rotebühlstrasse 121
70178 Stuttgart (DE)

(72) Inventors:
• Wainfan, Lynne S.
Long Beach, CA 90808 (US)

(54) Method and system for providing wideband communications to mobile users in a satellite-based network

(57) A satellite-based communications system operating at high data rates includes a plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) each having uplink and downlink antennas (30,32) for transmitting and receiving a plurality of signals utilizing a plurality of spot beams to and from a plurality of coverage areas (43) at a predetermined range of frequencies. Each of the satellites (12, 14, 15) transmit and receive the signals at one of a first plurality of data rates. The system also includes a plurality of user terminals (18,20) for transmitting and receiving signals to and from the plurality of communications

satellites (12, 14, 15) at the predetermined range of frequencies and at one of the first plurality of data rates. Each of the user terminals (18,20) having a steerable antenna for tracking relative movement of each of the user terminals (18,20) with respect to each of the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) and for tracking movement of each of the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) in order to maintain communications with the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15).



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Description

Cross-Reference to Related Applications

This invention is related to co-pending application entitled "Method And System For Communicating High Rate Data In A Satellite-Based Communications Network," having the same assignee as the present invention, and which is hereby incorporated by reference.

Technical Field

This invention relates to methods and systems for providing wideband communications to mobile users in a satellite-based communications network.

Background Art

Wired terrestrial systems offer communications at high data rates, but only while the user is sitting behind a computer. As soon as the user goes to a conference room, walks outside an office building, gets into a car, or drives to a park, the connection is lost. Mobility, however, can be supported in one of two ways, terrestrial-based wireless networks or satellite-based communications systems.

Terrestrial-based wireless networks provide voice or data communications between a mobile user and a fixed user or to other mobile users, as well as communications for modem-equipped computers and other similar devices such as mobile facsimile machines. No existing wireless networks have been optimized for a mix of voice, data, and video, despite the trend towards multimedia traffic. Several wireless and wired standards, such as asynchronous transfer mode (ATM), are being designed to optimize multimedia traffic. Wireless wide area networks (WANs) typically carry voice, whereas wireless local area networks (LANs) typically carry data. Most wireless WAN traffic operates at under 19.2 kbps. Wireless LANs that support data rates up to 10 Mbps have begun to appear, but they are limited in range to tens of meters.

A typical terrestrial-based wireless network includes a grid of service zones or cells, with each cell having a base station situated near its center. A mobile user located in a particular cell is connected to that cell's base station through low-power radio frequency (RF) transmissions. Each base station is connected by trunk lines to other gateways, which in turn are connected by trunk lines to various other networks. Each of these cells require costly infrastructure development and cover only a very small area. Placing a wireless base station every 200 m to provide global mobile communications is a very costly and time-consuming endeavor. In addition, the elevation angle between the user and the base station is relatively low for terrestrial-based wireless networks. At high frequencies, obstructions such as trees, buildings, signs, etc. can interfere with

communications.

To provide wireless service, satellite-based communications systems have been proposed which would provide world-wide coverage. These proposed systems typically include a constellation of satellites in one orbit only, such as geostationary earth orbit (GEO) only or non-geosynchronous orbit (NGSO) only. Communications satellites in geosynchronous orbit provide coverage in predetermined areas on the earth from the equator. Coverage is typically excluded from the oceans so that satellite capacity is not wasted on non-populated waters. Communications satellites in geosynchronous orbit, however, provide limited coverage at higher or lower latitudes than the equator.

Communications satellites in non-geosynchronous orbit, such as medium earth orbit (MEO) or low earth orbit (LEO), travel relative to the Earth's rotation and typically provide high elevation angle coverage at the higher and lower latitudes, and since they are closer to earth, propagation time delays are minimized. Non-geosynchronous communications satellites, however, waste satellite capacity over the oceans during their orbit and currently do not support wideband service to mobile users.

Data rates up to 19.2 kbps, as available from wireless WANs, will not meet future data rate needs of consumers. For example, many computer users are upgrading their wired modems to 56.6 kbps whenever possible. Such users desire a fast response from their modems even while they are away from their desks. In addition, the nature of the information being transferred is changing from short, text-based electronic mail messages to communications with embedded video clips. Such media-rich messages consume high bandwidth and communications resources, thus requiring high data rates to allow them to be transmitted and received within a reasonable period of time.

Thus, there exists a need for a satellite communications system that provides wideband communications to mobile users. There also exists a need for a satellite communications system that provides global communications service while maximizing the useful capacity of the satellites, reducing the perceived time delay, and maximizing the minimum elevation angle across latitudes.

Disclosure Of The Invention

It is thus a general object of the present invention to provide a wideband satellite communications system providing global wideband network services to mobile users.

In carrying out the above object and other objects, features, and advantages of the present invention, a system is provided for communicating wideband communications to mobile users in a satellite-based network. The system includes a plurality of satellites each having uplink and downlink antennas for transmitting

and receiving a plurality of signals utilizing a plurality of spot beams to and from a plurality of coverage areas at a predetermined range of frequencies. Each of the plurality of satellites transmit and receive the plurality of signals at one of a first plurality of data rates. The system further includes a plurality of user terminals for transmitting and receiving signals to and from the plurality of communications satellites at the predetermined range of frequencies and at one of the first plurality of data rates. Each of the user terminals have a steerable antenna for tracking relative movement of each of the user terminals with respect to each of the plurality of communications satellites and for tracking movement of each of the plurality of communications satellites so as to maintain communications with the plurality of communications satellites.

The above object and other objects, features and advantages of the present invention are readily apparent from the following detailed description of the best mode for carrying out the invention when taken in connection with the accompanying drawings.

Brief Description Of The Drawings

FIGURE 1 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating a satellite communications system of the present invention;

FIGURE 2 is a schematic illustration of a GEO/MEO constellation of communications satellites utilized in the present invention;

FIGURE 3 is a schematic illustration of a GEO/Inclined Geosynchronous Orbit (IGSO) ground track of communications satellites alternatively utilized in the present invention;

FIGURE 4 is a schematic block diagram illustrating a communications subsystem within the satellites of the present invention; and

FIGURE 5 is a schematic illustration of satellite coverage using spot beams.

Best Modes For Carrying Out The Invention

Referring first to Figure 1, a communications system 10 with a typical geometry for practicing the present invention is diagrammatically illustrated. In general, the system 10 includes a plurality of communications satellites in geostationary earth orbit (GEO) 12 and in non-geostationary earth orbit (NGSO) 14, 15 a ground station 16 for controlling and maintaining operation of satellites 12, 14, 15 and user terminals in the form of either mobile devices 18 or portable devices 20. The system 10 also includes a system access node 22 situated in each region serviced by satellites 12, 14, 15 which is connected by trunk lines to one of several possible net-

works 23, e.g., local or long distance public switched telephone networks (PSTN), Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM) networks, the Internet, DirecPC™ (a satellite-based Internet access system), and any other data or voice networks. Still further, the system 10 uses information from at least one GPS satellite 24 to assist in providing positioning information to mobile devices 18.

To provide efficient global coverage, satellites 12, 14, 15 are positioned in two different constellations. The GEO satellites 12 provide quick introduction of regional services, low cost service over selected regions, and greater capacity over high-traffic areas than a NGSO constellation. Preferably, GEO satellites 12 consist of a plurality of satellites in geostationary orbit over high demand regions.

The NGSO satellites 14, 15 may consist of either medium earth orbit (MEO) satellites 14 or inclined geosynchronous orbit (IGSO) satellites 15. Both MEO and IGSO satellites provide high elevation angle service to higher latitudes, and add satellite diversity to mitigate shadowing effects. MEO satellites 14 reduce latency for highly interactive applications. The round-trip delay to a MEO satellite 14 at an altitude of 10,352.080 km is approximately 80 ms, which serves interactive, real-time traffic well. The MEO constellation also provides a large overall system capacity at a lower complexity than does a low earth orbit (LEO) constellation. Preferably, the MEO constellation is formed by 4 planes, with 5 satellites per plane, as shown in Figure 2. Also preferably, the MEO constellation is at an equatorial altitude of 10352 km for a 6-hour orbit that repeats its ground track approximately every twenty-four hours. The repeatable ground track feature simplifies the complexity of the satellite payload, since it only has to store four maps identifying its four different orbit patterns. The repeatable ground track also simplifies the sharing of spectrum with other systems. The satellites in each plane are inclined by 30-60 degrees and have optimized phasing between planes. This constellation allows for over 35 degree elevation to latitudes up to 80 degrees.

The system 10 of the present invention can share the requested frequency spectrum with other satellite and terrestrial constellations through satellite diversity. In the MEO implementation, dual satellite diversity exists at latitudes up to 70 degrees, which permits a user to switch to another satellite in view when the signal from its original satellite degrades due to low elevation angle, shadowing, or interference. Over 50% of the time, the MEO user sees three satellites in the latitudes between 20 and 60 degrees. This satellite diversity also allows increased capacity in a particular geographic location.

IGSO satellites 15 may alternatively be utilized for many of the same reasons an MEO constellation is used, e.g., to provide high elevation angle coverage for higher latitudes than available through GEO satellites, and to minimize the interference with other communication systems operating at the same frequency. Preferably,

bly, the IGSO constellation consists of 4 planes of three satellites per plane, phased by 90 degrees between planes at 55 degrees inclination. A ground track of the IGSO satellites 14 is shown in Figure 3. As shown in Figure 3, IGSO satellites 15 share an orbit slot with GEO satellites 12. That is, the constellation of IGSO satellites 15 allows the IGSO satellite 15 to pass over an arc of the GEO satellite 12. Scarce frequency spectrum can be shared between GEO satellites 12 and IGSO satellites 15. This configuration also allows an additional satellite, not part of the system 10 of the present invention, to be placed in the same orbit slot and provide service while operating at the same frequency, thereby sharing frequency spectrum.

Each of the satellites 12, 14, 15 are preferably high power satellites that use a multi-panel solar array system, along with outboard radiator panels attached to the main body to dissipate heat generated from high powered Traveling Wave Tubes (TWTs). A schematic block diagram illustrating a communications payload 29 within satellites 12, 14, 15 is shown in Figure 4. Each satellite 12, 14, 15 includes a high frequency uplink antenna array 30, a high frequency downlink antenna array 32, a hybrid switch 34, and an intersatellite link 36. This architecture allows a signal received by one satellite to be transponded directly back to the same beam, switched to another beam, or relayed by intersatellite links through other satellites, forming a global network for the transport of real-time voice and data signals.

Payload 29 operates in a predetermined frequency range, preferably in the 50/40 GHz FSS region (i.e., V-band), or any other similar high frequency range, to provide high capacity service to small user terminals. Data rates up to 2.048 Mbps (equivalent to E1 rate) for portable devices 20 and up to 10 Mbps (equivalent to Ethernet rates) for mobile devices 18 can be supported. Users operating at data rates below the E1 or Ethernet levels can be accommodated by submultiplexing the signals at the user terminal 18.

Uplink antenna array 30 and downlink antenna array 32 receive and transmit spot beams carrying signals at a predetermined range of frequencies. Narrow spot beams allow a greater power to be effectively received and transmitted in the area they cover and enable very small antennas for mobile devices 18. A single satellite antenna can produce many spot beams. Not only do satellites with multiple narrow beam antennas provide a higher radiated power to a covered area, but the same frequency can also be reused several times for different portions of the earth, resulting in more efficient use of scarce frequency allocations.

In the present invention, a surface, or area, such as the Continental United States (CONUS), which receives communications services of the present invention is divided into a plurality of coverage areas 43, as shown in Figure 5. Uplink and downlink antennas 30, 32, respectively, can support a predetermined number of coverage areas, e.g., 200. However, a subset of the plu-

ality of coverage areas 43 is chosen to be used by uplink and downlink antenna arrays 30, 32, respectively, to support communications services in selected metropolitan areas having heavy traffic. As an example, the Los Angeles area can be served by one high capacity beam, (e.g., Beam 1) while other areas, such as Phoenix and Detroit, are served by other high capacity beams (e.g., Beams 40 and 60). This configuration is controlled by beam selection commands sent by ground station 16. Thus, the spot beams formed by GEO satellites 12 are semi-fixed in position, until reconfigured at a later date. Thus, available satellite resources, such as weight and power, are optimized. The MEO spot beams are reconfigured dynamically as the MEO satellite 14 travels.

Geo satellites 12 preferably transmit the spot beams utilizing a multibeam antenna array. Many small feed horns are positioned so that their signals are reflected in narrow beams by a dish portion of the antenna. For the MEO satellites 14 and the IGSO satellites 15, the spot beams are formed by steerable phased array antennas.

When traffic is received from a source beam that is destined for the same beam, hybrid switch 34 allows the traffic to be sent through bent-pipe repeater 40 down to the same beam with only a carrier frequency translation. Alternatively, the traffic through bent-pipe repeater 40 can be routed to one or more hub beams. The system access node 22 in the receiving beam receives the information and routes the traffic to its intended destination either through the wired network 23 or back through the satellite. This configuration allows for full flexibility in routing traffic to its ultimate destination, while reducing the satellite switch size, power draw, and mass.

When traffic is received from a source beam that is destined for a different beam, hybrid switch 34 routes the traffic through full digital packet switch 41. Full digital packet switch 41 demodulates incoming packets, reads the headers and decodes the packets, routes the packets to their destination beams, encodes the packets and remodulates the packets. This feature allows direct connections between user terminals 18, 20, as well as bypass of the terrestrial network for other connections. A packet arrangement allows a user to be charged for services based on bit traffic rather than a more expensive interconnect time.

Thus, hybrid switch 34 allows routing from one beam to another and bypasses full digital packet switch 41 for bent-pipe connections to predetermined beams. The system 10 allows controller 39 at the satellite to control real-time traffic on satellites 12, 14, 15 rather than on the ground, so as to reduce transmission delay, congestion and complexity and cost of the total system.

The logic determines whether a signal should be sent through the bent-pipe repeater 40 or through the digital packet switch 41 can be implemented in many ways. One method would be to use special frequency bands for the transmission of bent-pipe traffic. In this

method, the user terminal 18,20 transmits the signal at a specific frequency depending on whether or not signal is to be bent-pipe routed back to the same beam as the source location of the signal, or packet-switched to a different beam. The satellite, detecting traffic on these frequencies, knows to route the traffic through the bent-pipe repeater or to the packet switch via hard-wired connections. Another method would be to use specific time slots for bent-pipe traffic and other time slots for packet-switched traffic. In this method, the table of which time slots are used for bent pipe traffic and which time slots are used for packet-switched traffic would be stored in a routing table 38. This routing table 38 can be updated by commands sent by ground station 16 via a controller 39 onboard the satellite. Thus, the signals can be differentiated at the satellite without the need for demodulation, reducing the satellite switch size, power consumption, and mass.

The user terminal 18,20 can transmit both types of signals; those meant to be bent-piped back to the same beam or packet-switched to a different beam. There are various methods for the user terminal 18,20 to select which type of signal to transmit. One method is to have the terminal automatically select the type of signal based on the application; local phone calls, for instance, might all be sent as bent-pipe signals, whereas web browsing might automatically use the packet-switched signal to more quickly access distant web servers. Another method is to have the user select whether his connection is to be back to the same beam or to a different beam.

The data rates vary depending upon the user terminal 18, 20 and whether or not rain is present. When there is no rain present, mobile devices 18 support maximum bit rates of 10 Mbps, while portable devices 20 support maximum bit rates of 2 Mbps. The minimum data rate supported is 4 kbps for compressed voice traffic. In heavy rain periods, user terminals 18, 20 fall back to a lower data rate to mitigate the effects of additional signal attenuation caused by rain. In this lower data rate mode, mobile devices 18 support bit rates of up to 2.5 Mbps, while portable devices 20 support bit rates of 500 kbps. These data rates can carry a range of services, including voice, high quality video, image downloads, and internet/intranet browsing. The control of the data rate can be accomplished by one of several possible methods. Preferably, the data rate is controlled onboard the satellite by having the controller 39 detect degraded performance in a given service area 43 and automatically adjust the information data rate. The data rate is adjusted by including more error correction bits in the signal which increases the reliability of the message while reducing the effective data rate.

Because weather conditions are local, a portion of the beam (Beam #1) serving the Los Angeles area might be operating in the clear mode, while another portion of the same beam may be experiencing rain. In order to minimize the impact of lower data rates to the

area affected by the rain, the area where lower data rates must be used is localized at any point in time. A user learns of the current data rate through the connection setup procedure. If the weather changes during the connection, the satellite controller 39 sends a broadcast information packet informing the affected users or the data rate change. User terminals 18, 20 then automatically switch to the lower data rate.

Intersatellite links 36 are included so that traffic from one satellite covering a particular region or selected metropolitan areas can be linked to a second satellite covering the same or other areas and regions. Intersatellite line 36 also permits seamless handoffs of traffic as one NGSO satellite leaves a region and another enters. Intersatellite link 36 may be an optical (or laser) link operating in the 1.6 micron region via two 9 inch laser-telescope assemblies 71,73. Alternatively, intersatellite link 36 may be a radio frequency (RF) link operating in the 60 GHz region.

As discussed above, each of the satellites 12, 14, 15 are also in communication with ground station 16. Ground station 16 has two functions. A satellite control function manages the health and status of all the satellites 12, 14, 15 and maintains their orbits. A network operations control function provides resource management, fault management, accounting and billing information. Ground station 16 is preferably placed in low-rain regions of the world so as to provide line-of-sight communications with each of the satellites 12, 14, 15.

The system 10 further includes mobile devices 18 or portable devices 20. Mobile devices 18 provide safety, productivity and entertainment services to mobile vehicles, such as cars, trucks, airplanes, trains or boats. Utilizing GPS 24, tracking information and location-dependent services can be provided to mobile device 18. Mobile device 18 is preferably a conformal tracking phased array antenna mounted to the roof of the mobile vehicle so as to maintain communication with each of satellites 12, 14, 15 even though mobile device 18 is in motion. Mobile device 18 is preferably 50 cm x 50 cm.

Portable devices 20 allow a user to stay connected to a variety of services anywhere in the world. Portable device 20 is a notebook-sized device, preferably no larger than 20 cm x 30 cm in size, that is configured to be connected to a variety of electronic devices which would otherwise use a wired modem connection. As with mobile devices 18, portable devices 20 includes a tracking antenna, such as an electronic phased-array antenna, to communicate with any of the satellites 12, 14, 15.

System access node 22 of the present invention provides end users a transparent connection to terrestrial networks 23. System access node 22 includes an antenna, such as a fixed parabolic antenna or a mechanically steered or phased array antenna, to communicate with each of the satellites 12, 14, 15. System access node 22 demodulates the received signals, and

routes the traffic through the terrestrial network 23 to their ultimate destinations. By providing a global communications mesh, and by interfacing to existing terrestrial networks, the system 10 of the present invention will be an integral and defining part of the Global Information Infrastructure (GII), and part of the U.S. National Information Infrastructure (NII).

The satellite communications system of the present invention serves the increasing number of people on-the-go who desire voice and high data-rate, interactive data connections from anywhere. Using either the portable or mobile device, users are able to stay connected to a variety of networks such as the internet, wide and local area networks, home and office computers, ATM networks, and the terrestrial phone system.

In one possible implementation, the capacity to a mobile user 18 is 9.75 Gbps per GEO satellite 12 and 5.12 Gbps per MEO satellite 14. The MEO constellation can support up to 102 Gbps worldwide. With a total of 28 satellites in both MEO 14 and GEO 12, the total mobile system capacity jumps up to 190 Gbps worldwide. The network is capable of supporting a wide variety of data rates, ranging from 4 kbps for compressed voice traffic up to 10 Mbps for Ethernet speeds. The number of users at each data rate will vary, and the corresponding total number of users that the network can support will vary accordingly.

The system 10 of the present invention can include, or be combined with, other systems to enable increased capacity over high-population areas and ubiquitous coverage over lower-population areas and to provide a backup connection at a lower frequency to maintain the communications link in rain conditions. This can be accomplished by having the other systems transmit a wide area beam surrounding the narrow spot beams to provide service to the remote areas not covered by the spot beams. The data rates in these areas, however, would typically be lower than the data rates of the present invention.

While the best modes for carrying out the invention have been described in detail, those familiar with the art to which this invention relates will recognize various alternative designs and embodiments for practicing the invention as defined by the following claims.

Claims

1. A system for providing wideband communications to mobile users in a first satellite-based network, the system comprising:

a plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) each having uplink and downlink antennas (30,32) for transmitting and receiving a plurality of signals utilizing a plurality of spot beams to and from a plurality of coverage areas (43) at a predetermined range of frequencies, each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) transmitting and

receiving the plurality of signals at one of a first plurality of data rates; and

a plurality of user terminals (18,20) for transmitting and receiving signals to and from the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) at the predetermined range of frequencies and at one of the first plurality of data rates, and each of the user terminals (18,20) having a steerable antenna for tracking relative movement of each of the user terminals (18,20) with respect to each of the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) and for tracking movement of each of the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) as to maintain communications with the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15).

2. The system of claim 1, characterized in that each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further comprise an intersatellite link (36) for communicating with each of the other plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15).
3. The system of claim 1 or 2, characterized in that the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) include GEO satellites (12) in a geostationary earth orbit constellation.
4. The system of any of claims 1 through 3, characterized in that the uplink and downlink antennas (30,32) are multibeam antenna arrays.
5. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further include a plurality of MEO satellites (14) in a medium earth orbit constellation.
6. The system of claim 5, characterized in that the plurality of MEO satellites (14) include a minimum number of satellites such that coverage areas and elevation angles are maximized and delay times and handovers are minimized.
7. The system of claim 5 or 6, characterized in that the plurality of MEO satellites (14) reside in four orbital planes, with five satellites in each of the orbital planes.
8. The system of any of claims 5 through 7, characterized in that each of the plurality of MEO satellites (14) have an altitude approximately 10352 km above earth.
9. The system of any of claims 5 through 8, characterized in that each of the plurality of MEO satellites (14) provide elevation angles greater than 35 degrees.

10. The system of any of claims 5 through 9, characterized in that each of the plurality of MEO satellites (14) have a repeatable ground track.
11. The system of claim 10, characterized in that each of the plurality of MEO satellites (14) have four orbits, each orbit being a six-hour orbit that repeats every 24 hours.
12. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that the uplink and downlink antennas (30,32) are steerable phased array antennas.
13. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further include a plurality of IGSO satellites (15) in an inclined geosynchronous orbit constellation.
14. The system of claim 13, characterized in that the plurality of IGSO satellites (15) include a minimum number of satellites such that coverage areas are maximized and handovers are minimized.
15. The system of claim 14, characterized in that the plurality of IGSO satellites (15) are positioned in four orbital planes, with three satellites in each of the orbital planes.
16. The system of claim 15, characterized in that adjacent satellites are 90 degrees apart.
17. The system of any of claims 13 through 16, characterized in that each of the IGSO satellites (15) provide elevation angles greater than 30 degrees.
18. The system of any of claims 13 through 17, characterized in that each of the IGSO satellites (15) have an inclination angle of 55 degrees with respect to the equator.
19. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that each of the plurality of satellites further include a hybrid switch coupled to the uplink antennas for routing the signals between the plurality of coverage areas.
20. The system of claim 19, characterized in that each of the user terminals (18,20) transmit signals from a source beam of the plurality of coverage areas (43) for receipt at a destination beam of the plurality of coverage areas (43), and wherein each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further comprise a programmable routing table (38) coupled to the hybrid switch (34), the routing table (38) including user routing information so as to allow hybrid switch (34) to route the plurality of signals between the source beam and the destination beam based on the signal transmitted by the user terminal (18,20) and the user routing information in the routing table (38).
21. The system of claim 20, characterized in that the user routing information is frequency-related.
22. The system of claim 20, characterized in that the user routing information is time-dependent.
23. The system of claim 20, characterized in that each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further comprise a bent-pipe repeater (40) for transmitting signals destined for a destination beam that is the same as the source beam.
24. The system of claim 23, characterized in that each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further comprise a packet switch (41) for packet switching signals destined for a destination beam that is different than the source beam.
25. The system of claim 20, characterized in that each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further comprise a controller (39) for controlling transmission of the signals at the one of the first plurality of data rates.
26. The system of claim 25, characterized in that the controller (39) controls the transmission of the signal at a second one of the first plurality of data rates upon detecting signal attenuation.
27. The system of claim 26, characterized in that the signal is transmitted at the second one of the first plurality of data rates to at least one user terminal (18,20) in one of the plurality of coverage areas (43).
28. The system of claim 25, characterized in that the controller (39) is further operative to reprogram the programmable routing table (38).
29. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized by a ground station (16) for transmitting and receiving signals to and from the controller (39) of each of the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) for monitoring and controlling each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15).
30. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that the predetermined range of frequencies is the 40/50 6 Hz region of frequencies.
31. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that the intersatellite link (36) is an optical link.
32. The system of any of the preceding claims

through 30, characterized in that the intersatellite link (36) is a radio frequency link.

33. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that the user terminal (18,20) is a mobile device (18) adapted for use with a vehicle. 5
34. The system of claim 33, characterized in that the steerable antenna is a conformal antenna. 10
35. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that the user terminal (18,20) is a portable device (20) adapted to connect to electronic devices through a modem connection. 15
36. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that each of the coverage areas (43) are approximately 200 km in diameter.
37. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized by a system access node (22), connected to a plurality of terrestrial networks (23), for transmitting and receiving the signals to and from each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) so as to connect any one of the plurality of user terminals (18,20) to one of the plurality of terrestrial networks (23). 20 25
38. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized by a system access node (16), in communication with a second satellite-based network having a second plurality of satellites, for transmitting and receiving the signals to and from each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) so as to connect any one of the plurality of user terminals (18,20) to one of the second plurality of satellites. 30
39. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized by a third plurality of satellites each having uplink and downlink antennas for transmitting and receiving a plurality of signals utilizing a plurality of wide area beams to and from a plurality of large coverage areas (43) at a second predetermined range of frequencies, each of the third plurality of satellites transmitting and receiving the plurality of signals at one of a second plurality of data rates, the second plurality of data rates being less than the first plurality of data rates, so as to provide ubiquitous coverage. 40 45
40. The system of any of the preceding claims, characterized in that each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) are positioned in an orbit slot and transmit and receive signals to and from a particular coverage area, and wherein the system further comprising at least one additional satellite positioned in the same orbit slot as one of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15). 50 55

41. In a satellite-based communications network including a plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) each having uplink and downlink antennas (30,32) for transmitting and receiving a plurality of signals utilizing a plurality of spot beams to and from a plurality of coverage areas (43) at a predetermined range of frequencies, and the network further including a plurality of user terminals (18,20) for transmitting and receiving the plurality of signals to and from the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15), and each of the plurality of user terminals (18,20) having a steerable antenna for tracking relative movement of each of the user terminals (18,20) with respect to each of the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15) and for tracking movement of each of the plurality of communications satellites (12, 14, 15), a method for providing wide-band communications to mobile users, the method comprising:

transmitting a signal to one of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) at one of the plurality of data rates from one of the plurality of user terminals (18,20) in a first one of the plurality of coverage areas;
receiving the signal from the one of the plurality of user terminals (18,20);
processing the received signal at the one of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15); and
transmitting the processed signal at the one of the plurality of data rates to a second one of the plurality of coverage areas.

42. The method of claim 41, characterized in that each of the plurality of satellites (12, 14, 15) further includes a routing table (38) having user routing information and wherein processing the received signal includes comparing the received signal from the one of the plurality of user terminals (18,20) with the user routing information. 35 40
43. The method of claim 41 or 42, characterized in that processing the received signal further includes packet-switching the received signal if the first and second one of the plurality of coverage areas are different. 45
44. The method of any of claims 41 through 43, characterized in that processing the received signal further includes repeating the received signal if the first and second one of the plurality of coverage areas are the same. 50
45. The method of any of claims 41 through 44, characterized by monitoring performance of the signal to detect degradation in the signal. 55
46. The method of any of claims 41 through 45, charac-

terized by transmitting the processed signal at a second one of the plurality of data rates upon detecting a degradation in the signal.

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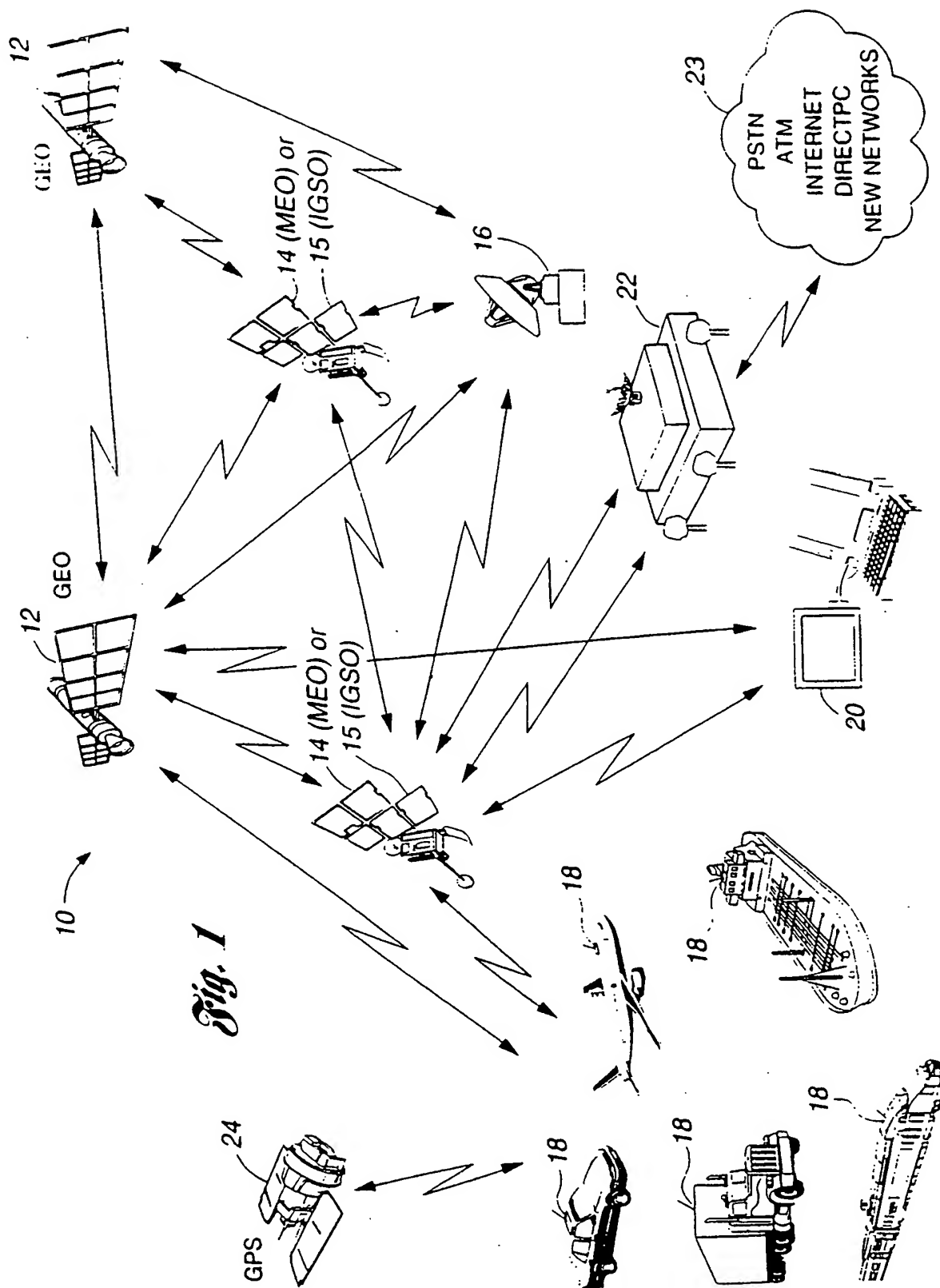
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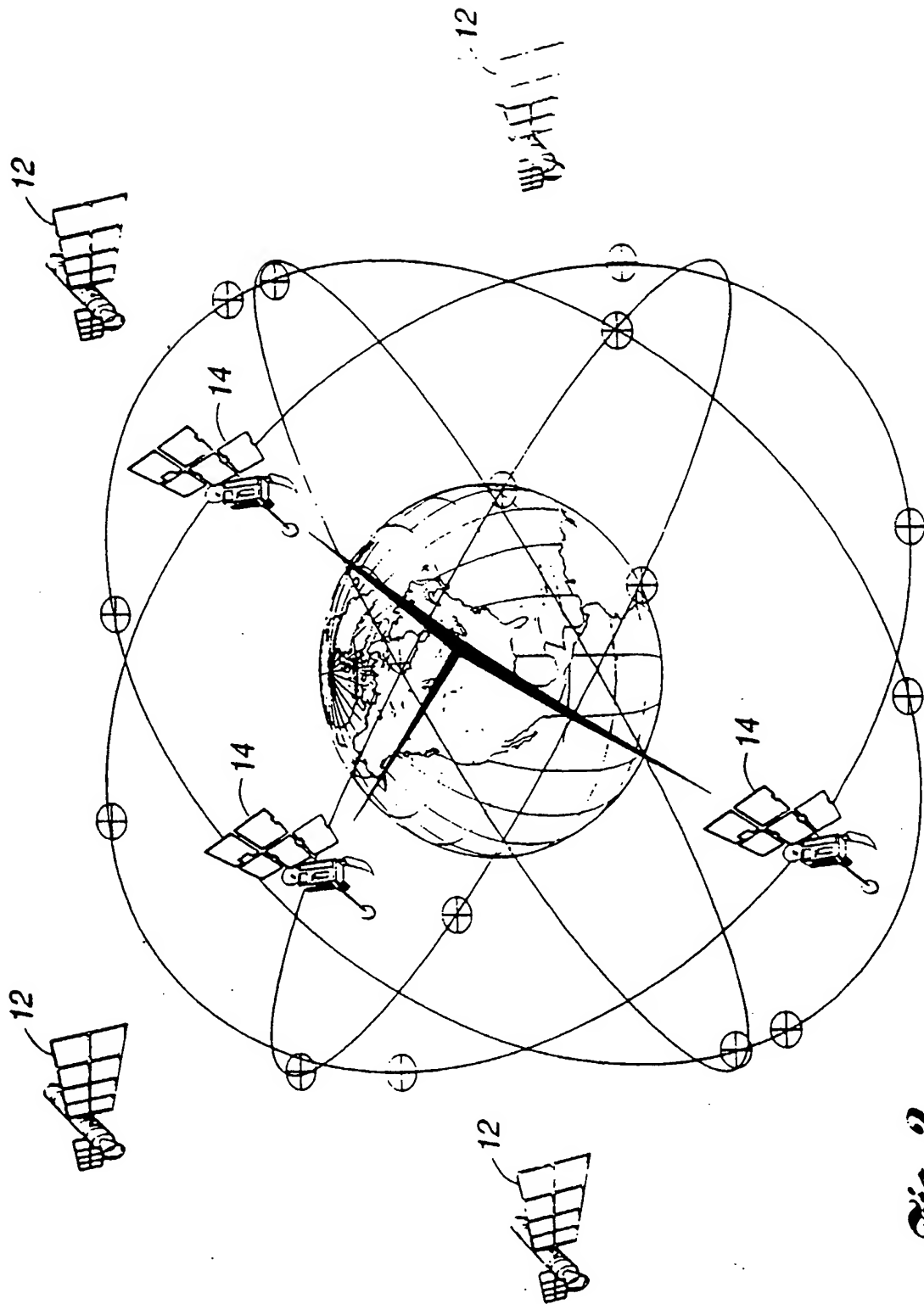


Fig. 2

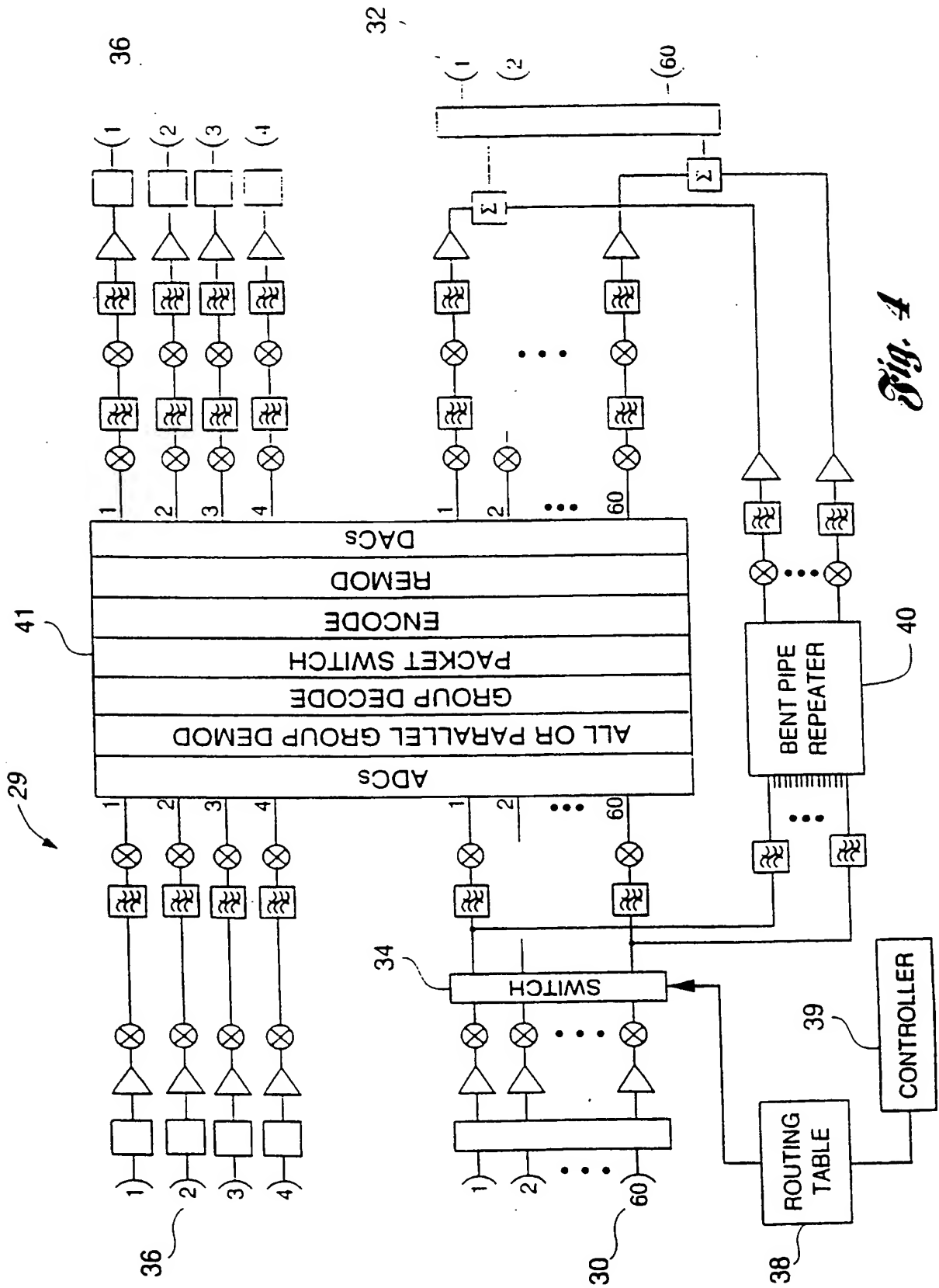


Fig. 4

